

## I

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## Thoreau's reputation

Thoreau's reputation is unique. It has a pattern all its own, filled with paradoxes and contradictions, and widely vacillating from decade to decade. In his own day he was generally dismissed as a minor writer who would soon be forgotten; yet in our day he is universally recognized as one of the few American writers of the nineteenth century who deserve the appellation "great." But the progress of his reputation has not been steady.

Aside from a bit piece that he published anonymously in a local Concord newspaper in 1837, just after graduating from Harvard, he broke into print in the pages of the Transcendentalist *Dial* in 1840, where his neighbor and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson pressured the editor, Margaret Fuller, to print some of his early essays and poems. Later, after Emerson himself took over the editorship of the *Dial*, he included more of Thoreau's short works. Other than an occasional bit of praise in some newspaper reviews, they achieved little notice and were generally dismissed as just another effusion of another of Emerson's many minor disciples. One of the earliest published evaluations of Thoreau's writing, James Russell Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* (1848), dismissed him as one who had "stolen all his apples from Emerson's orchard" and urged him to strike out on his own. This was a charge that would haunt Thoreau's literary career not only throughout his lifetime, but well into the twentieth century, even though it would be difficult to think of an author more ruggedly independent, or one who more fiercely prided himself on his distinct individualism than Henry Thoreau. Ironically, although Emerson's intentions were of the best, it has been suggested that in the long run he probably hindered the development of Thoreau's literary career rather than enhanced it, for he encouraged Thoreau in his early works to follow the styles and philosophy of the Transcendentalists, and it was only when Thoreau began to break out of that mold that he began to attract attention on his own.'

By 1843 Thoreau was able to place essays in the *Boston Miscellany* and the *Democratic Review*, but it was through his becoming acquainted with

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Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, late that year that he began achieving wider recognition. Greeley encouraged him to write on more popular subjects and then, acting as his agent, placed these works in such magazines of national circulation as *Graham's*, *Sartain's*, and *Putnam's*. What is more, Greeley went out of his way to praise these essays in the pages of his *Tribune* to be sure they were noticed.

When, while at Walden Pond, Thoreau wrote his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Emerson urged him to rush it into print. It might have been a much more successful book had Thoreau taken more time to polish it, as he did later with *Walden*. As it was, it was an unmitigated commercial disaster. Of the thousand copies printed by James Munroe of Boston in 1849, only 219 copies were sold, and Thoreau was forced to pay Munroe \$290 for printing costs. Although the book received more than twenty reviews, most of them were brief and many were generally unfavorable. The religious journals in particular were offended by Thoreau's "paganism" and the literary critics by the structural problems of the book.<sup>2</sup> Although Munroe had promised and had even advertised in the back pages of *A Week* his plan to publish Thoreau's *Walden* "soon," the failure of *A Week* caused Munroe to withdraw his offer, and it was another five years before Thoreau could persuade another publisher to issue *Walden*. By then it was a vastly different and improved book.

Thoreau was early active in the antislavery movement, but that fact did not endear him to many of his neighbors, who already dismissed him as a ne'er-do-well who wasted his time and Harvard education by living in a "hut" in the woods and wandering daily in the woods and fields of Concord. After he had spent a night in jail for refusing to pay taxes, rather than support a government that condoned slavery, he delivered a lecture before the Concord Lyceum on "The Relation of the Individual to the State." It caught the eye of that Transcendentalist enthusiast Elizabeth Peabody, and she published it under the title "Resistance to Civil Government" in the one and only issue of her *Aesthetic Papers*, in the spring of 1849. Neither the periodical nor Thoreau's essay attracted much attention, and most of the few who did notice it dismissed it as the work of a crank. In a later reincarnation, when it became known as "Civil Disobedience," it was to become one of the most influential political tracts in American history, but in Thoreau's lifetime it was ignored.

The lyceum movement, founded by Josiah Holbrook in the mid-1820s, had become rapidly widely popular in New England, sponsoring lectures to enliven the long winter evenings. Thoreau joined the Concord Lyceum as a child and, soon after returning to Concord from college, began speaking regularly before it. His early attempts were not particularly successful,

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being too abstract and Transcendental for his audience. But when at his audience's suggestion he began to report on his life at Walden Pond, things changed for the better. He livened up his delivery, and his audiences found his lectures filled with good humor – though a few who missed his wit thought him churlish and grumpy. Nonetheless his good reputation spread, and he began to receive invitations from lyceums outside of Concord, eventually going as far as Portland, Maine, and Philadelphia to lecture. Yet he was never able to arrange the long lecture tours with which some of his friends, such as Emerson, were to earn their livelihood.

To try to stir up more interest in Thoreau's lectures, Horace Greeley in the spring of 1849 editorialized about him in the *Tribune* and followed it up with some concocted correspondence in the "letters to the editor" column, but it apparently had little effect. However, it was just about this time that H. G. O. Blake, a Worcester, Massachusetts, schoolteacher and former Unitarian minister, came across one of Thoreau's early essays in the *Dial* and overnight became Thoreau's first and most ardent disciple. They immediately began a long friendship and correspondence. Whenever Blake received a letter from Thoreau, he would call in a group of his friends and read the letter to them. Soon he began arranging regularly to have Thoreau lecture in Worcester and developed there a circle of friends who did much to boost Thoreau's reputation.

With the postponement of the publication of *Walden*, Thoreau went to work to improve the manuscript, eventually rewriting the text seven times, dramatically strengthening and improving it.<sup>3</sup> The rising firm of Ticknor & Fields in Boston accepted it for publication in 1854 and printed two thousand copies. Although there has grown up a legend that *Walden*, like *A Week*, was ignored on its publication, it actually received nearly one hundred reviews and notices, most of them highly favorable, and it sold all but 256 copies in its first year.

As we have seen, Thoreau was early active in the abolitionist movement, not only speaking out as he had with his "Civil Disobedience," but participating actively in the Underground Railroad aiding runaway slaves in escaping to freedom in Canada. His cabin at Walden Pond, despite tradition, was not a station on the railroad – it was too small to use as a hiding place. But he did make regular use of his parents' home in Concord to hide the fugitives overnight, then steered them on to Canada. When William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of the *Liberator*, called a protest meeting against the Fugitive Slave Law, in Framingham, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1854, Thoreau read a stirring paper, "Slavery in Massachusetts," protesting the shipping of captured slaves back to the South. It was published in both Garrison's *Liberator* and Greeley's *Tribune*.

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Thoreau was introduced to Captain John Brown of Osawatomie when Brown toured New England in the winter of 1857 to raise funds for his antislavery activities in Kansas. Then, after Brown struck against Harpers Ferry, in October 1859, in an effort to incite slaves to open rebellion, Thoreau was one of the first in the entire country to speak out in Brown's defense, even though most abolitionists were denouncing Brown as demoted. Thoreau called a meeting in Concord's Town Hall to deliver his fiery "Plea for Captain John Brown" and succeeded in winning many to his side; later he repeated the lecture in both Boston and Worcester. He also called a memorial meeting in Concord on the day of Brown's hanging and later wrote a third piece for delivery at Brown's burial. The former two received wide circulation when printed in James Redpath's popular *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* (1860).

While Thoreau had been at Walden in 1846, he took time out for a trip to the Maine Woods with his cousin George Thatcher, paddling the rivers and climbing Mount Katahdin (Ktaadn). Writing up his "excursion," as he liked to call it, he gave it first as a lecture in Concord and then published it in five installments in *Sartain's Union Magazine*. It set a new pattern for him, and he followed it up later with accounts of excursions to Cape Cod, Quebec, and twice more to Maine. Unfortunately, he more than once quarreled with his editors over their editing of his papers, and none of these essays were printed in book form before his death.

Because Thoreau thus published little in his last years of life, the impression has arisen that he had early written himself out. As a matter of fact he was busily engaged in writing right up through his final illness, but, as Emerson said in his eulogy of Thoreau, his writings were on so large a scale that he simply could not complete them. He became particularly involved in botanical studies, both in constructing a phenological chart of the Concord area, or, as he called it, a calendar of the seasons – a project that was never completed nor published – and a study of tree growth, which he delivered as a lecture at the local cattle show in 1860. The latter was published in both the county and the state agricultural reports for the year and also in the pages of the *New York Tribune*. It was Thoreau's one major contribution to scientific literature and is still accepted by botanists today. Subsidiary studies of his in the field have only recently started reaching print, among the most notable a gemlike essay on "Huckleberries" (1970) and "The Dispersion of Seeds" and other late natural history essays now available in *Faith in a Seed* (1993).

When in 1861 Thoreau realized he was dying of tuberculosis, he began a herculean effort to gather, edit, and publish as many as possible of his uncollected and unpublished works in order, as he said, to leave an estate

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for his widowed mother and unmarried sister. As a result, just after his death, in 1862, a number of his shorter essays, among them some of his now best-known – such as “Walking,” “Wild Apples,” “Autumnal Tints,” and “Life Without Principle” – first appeared in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*, sponsored by his publisher, Ticknor & Fields. What is more, they brought both *A Week* and *Walden* back into print within weeks of Thoreau's death, and they have never been out of print since.

Thoreau's death inspired astonishingly wide notice for an author who was supposedly so obscure and little-known in his lifetime. Ralph Waldo Emerson preached the eulogy at his funeral, and an expanded version was soon published in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*; it has been reprinted regularly ever since and was long the best-known piece ever written about Thoreau. Unfortunately, Emerson believed that Thoreau's greatest claim to fame was as a Stoic, and he tended to overemphasize the cold and the negative in his portrait; indeed, he so overdid it that he inadvertently turned many people away from Thoreau. Several years later when he came to edit Thoreau's *Letters to Various Persons* (1865), he did the same thing again, editing out of the letters anything that showed warmth and human kindness. Basically derogatory essays by James Russell Lowell and Robert Louis Stevenson, both of which attained wide circulation and reprinting, did much to spread a negative picture of Thoreau, even though Stevenson later recanted his position.

Meanwhile, however, Thoreau's family and friends were able to persuade Ticknor & Fields that there would be a demand if more of Thoreau's unpublished and uncollected works were brought into print. Sophia Thoreau and her brother's closest friend and later biographer Ellery Channing set to work editing them. *Excursions*, a collection of his shorter travel and natural history essays, appeared in 1863, with Emerson's eulogy as an introduction; *The Maine Woods*, in 1864; *Cape Cod* and Emerson's edition of the *Letters* in 1865; a grab-bag miscellany entitled *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* in 1866; and a newly reset edition of *A Week* in 1868, correcting the hundreds of typographical errors of the first edition. Although their sales were not large, they did serve to keep interest in Thoreau alive.

It was Emerson who, in 1837, persuaded Thoreau to start keeping a daily journal, primarily as a source and practice book for his more formal writings. Both *A Week* and *Walden* were culled and polished largely from this journal. By the early 1850s the Journal began gradually to become for Thoreau an end in itself. Its daily entries expanded greatly and became much more polished and finished. Soon after Thoreau's death his friends began efforts to get at least some of the Journal into print. Bronson Alcott

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proposed a volume of selections, but his project never got off the ground. Thomas Wentworth Higginson tried to persuade Sophia Thoreau to release the manuscript for publication, but she was convinced it was too personal and private to publish. When Higginson attempted to enlist Judge Rockwood Hoar, one of Concord's leading citizens, Hoar could only ask who would ever read it if it were printed.

Sophia Thoreau willed the manuscript volumes of the *Journal* to his Worcester disciple H. G. O. Blake. Blake soon developed the habit of gathering all the entries of a certain date together and on that date reading them to a gathering of Thoreau's friends. In the spring of 1878 Blake published in the pages of the *Atlantic* some of these gatherings of selections. It was just at the point when there was a great surge of interest in nature writings and it was nature writing that Blake had emphasized in his selections. Houghton Mifflin, the heirs of Ticknor & Fields, issued *Early Spring in Massachusetts*, a gathering of these spring pieces. They were soon followed by similar volumes: *Summer* in 1884, *Winter* in 1887, and *Autumn* in 1892. Thoreau rose to new heights of popularity.

Houghton Mifflin had been remarkably astute about Thoreau's writings even with little earlier encouragement. It was not until after 1880 that any of Thoreau's works achieved an average annual sale of more than two hundred copies. But in the 1870s Houghton Mifflin bought up all the available Thoreau copyrights from the heirs, and in the 1890s they issued in eleven volumes the first collected edition of Thoreau's works, the Riverside edition – though it sold only 310 sets in that decade.<sup>4</sup>

When Blake died, in 1898, the Thoreau manuscripts were willed to his friend E. Harlow Russell, the principal of the State Normal School in Worcester, Massachusetts. Russell apparently had little other than a monetary interest in them, for he first successfully sued the Thoreau family heirs for their copyrights to the unpublished works and in turn sold those rights to Houghton Mifflin for three thousand dollars. He sold the manuscripts themselves to J. Pierpont Morgan for his New York City library. (Ironically, Morgan cared not one jot for Thoreau, but George Hellman, Russell's agent, insisted Morgan buy the Thoreau manuscripts if he were to obtain the manuscript of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Children's Hour," which he did want and which Hellman owned. Nowadays the Thoreau manuscripts are looked upon as one of the greatest treasures of the Morgan Library.)

Houghton Mifflin, like many other publishers of the time, had been issuing limited "manuscript editions" of their major authors, so called because a leaf of the author's manuscript was included in the first volume.

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Professor Bliss Perry of Harvard, a Houghton Mifflin consultant, and Francis H. Allen, a young member of the company's staff who happened to be a Thoreau enthusiast, persuaded the firm to add Thoreau to their list. The Manuscript edition of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* came out in 1906 in twenty volumes, fourteen of them the nearly complete Journal, scrupulously edited by Allen (though it was to the then-popular nature writer Bradford Torrey that the credit for editing was assigned). It was limited to six hundred numbered copies, supplemented by the unnumbered Walden edition printed from the same plates but in a less luxurious binding. Although Houghton Mifflin was skeptical of its sales potential, it was sold out before publication. It has been reprinted in its entirety four different times since then, though Houghton Mifflin strangely never bothered to renew the copyright when it expired in 1934.

Although a few copies of the first editions of *A Week* and *Walden* had been shipped to England, neither volume was printed in England until *Walden* was issued by Walter Scott in 1886, and *A Week* in 1889. A. H. Japp, writing under the pseudonym "H. A. Page," had published a rather skimpy Thoreau biography in London in 1878, but it was followed in 1890 by the first good solid life, by Henry Salt, a British Fabian. In the United States, Ellery Channing's biography had been published in 1873, and Franklin B. Sanborn's in 1882, but both were so eccentrically written that they added little to Thoreau's fame or stature. Salt's biography, on the other hand, aroused much interest, particularly among British socialists, for Salt was the first to emphasize that side of Thoreau. Members of the British Labour Party became so interested that they often named their local chapters "Walden Clubs." Indeed, at the turn of the century, there was probably more interest in Thoreau in England than in his own country.

It was Salt who personally introduced Thoreau's works to Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi had come to England to study law and met Salt through their mutual interest in vegetarianism. When Gandhi later settled in South Africa to give legal aid to Indian laborers suffering under segregation laws, he adopted Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" as a manual of arms in his nonviolent fight for freedom. So great was his success that he was invited back to his native India to lead its campaign for independence from the British throne. Although his progress there was slow, he won international stature and, immediately after World War II, complete freedom for his country. Meanwhile, Count Leo Tolstoi in Russia had discovered the same Thoreau essay and did much to spread its fame among European intellectuals.

In Denmark, in the early days of World War II, "Civil Disobedience"

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Excerpt

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was adopted by the anti-Nazi resistance movement, and Thoreau became a national folk hero. In the 1950s Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used the techniques of Thoreau's essay in his battle for equality for African-Americans and made more progress in his fight in a few years than others had in the previous century. King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his efforts. Ironically, he, like Gandhi, fell victim to an assassin's violence in the end.

In the late years of the nineteenth century, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, a Concord resident and acquaintance of Thoreau, set himself up as self-appointed protector of Thoreau's reputation and turned out a vast number of books and articles about Thoreau and his contemporaries. Not only was he extremely careless in recording facts, he also fancied himself superior to Thoreau as a writer and insisted on rewriting much of Thoreau's work that he edited. Fortunately, a small coterie of ardent Thoreau scholars and enthusiasts led by Dr. Samuel Arthur Jones and E. B. Hill of Michigan and Fred Hosmer of Concord worked together to correct some of Sanborn's worst effusions and to establish more accurate facts and editions.<sup>5</sup>

For a period during and after World War I interest in Thoreau went into an eclipse of sorts, but with the coming of the Depression of the 1930s suddenly his philosophy of the simple life became usefully appealing and a revival was on. As early as 1913, John Macy, in his popular *Spirit of American Literature*, had emphasized Thoreau's political and economic theories, and in 1927 Vernon Louis Parrington, in his widely influential *Main Currents in American Thought*, furthered that interest in Thoreau.<sup>6</sup>

Although Houghton Mifflin around the turn of the century had helped to popularize Thoreau in the public schools of the country through their Riverside Literature Series of pamphlets, professors of literature on the college and university level showed strikingly little interest in Thoreau. The first doctoral dissertation on Thoreau (unfortunately now lost) had been done at the University of Michigan in 1899 by Ella Knapp, under the direction of Samuel Arthur Jones. Oddly enough, the second, by Helen A. Snyder, appeared in Germany in 1913. The third, Raymond Adams's *Henry Thoreau's Literary Theories and Criticism*, did not appear until 1928. Adams, by issuing an occasional mimeographed "Thoreau Newsletter" in the late 1930s, did much to arouse academic interest and new dissertations began appearing regularly. F. O. Matthiessen's seminal book, *American Renaissance* (1941), for the first time taking Thoreau seriously as a literary artist, launched a whole series of studies of Thoreau's artistry. Outstanding among them was Sherman Paul's *The Shores of America* (1953), still by far the best serious study of Thoreau's ideas. While Thoreau dissertations still continue to flow steadily from the universities, many unfortunately have



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become so pedantic and picayune that they have had little impact on the general public.

In 1941, I initiated a gathering together of a small group of Thoreau scholars and enthusiasts to organize the Thoreau Society and established the quarterly *Thoreau Society Bulletin*. The society has gradually grown into an international membership of fifteen hundred, and its annual meetings held in Concord, Massachusetts, at the time of Thoreau's birthday in July, are a regular event for Thoreauvians. It is the largest and longest-lived organization of its kind devoted to an American author.

Because so large a portion of Thoreau's writings was not published under his personal supervision during his lifetime, there have long been major problems with the accuracy of his texts. Finally, in the late 1960s, the Modern Language Association, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Princeton University Press joined efforts and brought together a group of scholars to start work on a new edition of all of Thoreau's works, with texts established by the latest scholarly methods. Eleven volumes have appeared so far, and a total of approximately twenty-five are planned.

Thoreau was slow to be translated into other modern languages, and even today *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience" are the only works of his that have been widely translated.<sup>7</sup> *Walden* appeared in German in 1897, Dutch in 1907, Russian in 1910, Japanese in 1911, French in 1922, Czechoslovakian in 1924, and Italian in 1928. After World War II, interest in Thoreau burgeoned around the world and *Walden* began appearing in virtually every major modern language. Some of the editions were sponsored by the American government. The Indian government, as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, sponsored the translation of *Walden* into at least fifteen of the country's major languages.

There has been a particular interest in Thoreau in Japan. *Walden* has been translated into Japanese a great many times. English editions with Japanese footnotes are standard texts in Japanese high schools. Editions of *Walden* are more generally available in Japanese bookstores than in American. A Japanese Thoreau Society was established in 1965, meets regularly twice a year, and publishes its own bulletin. And a great flood of books and articles on Thoreau comes from the Japanese universities.

Interest in Thoreau both in this country and abroad particularly flourished with the growth of student dissent during the Vietnam War. "Civil Disobedience" was translated into many of the major modern languages and became readily available on newsstands not only in the United States but also around Europe and Asia. The United States even issued a commemorative postage stamp in Thoreau's honor in 1967, and "listening to a different drummer" became the mode of the day. The Beat Generation

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of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg had idolized Thoreau in the 1950s, and now so did the hippies of the 1960s. As Lawrence Buell has so well pointed out, Thoreau's popularity took on many of the aspects of a cult.<sup>8</sup> Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee's *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* became one of the most widely performed plays of all time.

With the rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s and 1980s, Thoreau became its patron saint. "In wildness is the preservation of the world" became the slogan of the influential Sierra Club, and other slogans from Thoreau became popular bumper-sticker copy. The popular-music star Don Henley, who had discovered *Walden* in high school, started a fund to protect Walden Pond and Walden Woods when he learned that real estate developers were planning to build condominiums and office buildings near the pond; through a series of rock concerts Henley and other performers succeeded in raising many millions of dollars. With the revival of interest in American nature writers, Thoreau became the most quoted of them all.

Thus has been the course of Thoreau's reputation over the years. Ignored at first, he gradually gained recognition in a series of advances based on widely differing appeals – as a nature writer, an economist, a literary artist, an exponent of the simple life, a philosophical anarchist, and an environmentalist. That perhaps is his greatest achievement – his multifaceted appeal. Once nearly forgotten, he is now a household name.

#### NOTES

- 1 Steven Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 61.
- 2 Gary Scharnhorst, *Henry David Thoreau: An Annotated Bibliography of Comment and Criticism Before 1900* (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 13–19. With more than two thousand annotated entries, this volume is an astoundingly comprehensive guide to Thoreau's reputation in the nineteenth century.
- 3 J. Lyndon Shanley, *The Making of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). Fascinating as a detective story, this volume traces the development of *Walden* through all its various stages and gives the text of the first draft to compare with the final version.
- 4 Lawrence Buell, "Henry Thoreau Enters the Literary Canon," in *New Essays on "Walden"*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 36. This article prints many new details on Thoreau's publisher's part in enhancing his reputation.
- 5 *Toward the Making of Thoreau's Modern Reputation*, ed. Fritz Oehlshlaeger and George Hendrick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), passim.
- 6 Michael Meyer, *Several More Lives to Live: Thoreau's Political Reputation in America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1977), passim.